



தமிழியல்
JOURNAL
OF
TAMIL STUDIES

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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
OF TAMIL STUDIES

Tamil Nadu, India

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DECEMBER 1973

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The Indian Circumnavigators of the Past

L. K. RATHNAVEL

In our land, it is a pity to note the trend to attribute anything praiseworthy to Aryan race, culture or civilization and our people accept it in toto without any hesitation. Even seafaring is not spared. Were there not inhabitants in this land before the entry of the Vedic Aryans? The excavations in Mohanjodaro and Harappa shed a flood of light on the Pre-Aryan History of India.

Original Inhabitants of India

‘After about 2000 B.C. the Indus civilization trailed on the Gujarat, in a somewhat degenerate form and around 1800 B.C. vanished altogether. A probable cause of the downfall was the Aryan conquest of India. Some of the hymns of the Rig Veda must have been composed at the time of this conquest, and in this earliest literary records of the Aryans, we have references to great battles against the indigenous inhabitants, who are called Dasyus or Dasas, Pannis and Asuras. Hundreds of their fortified places were destroyed with the help of Indra, the god of war and Agni, the god of fire. The enemy is described as “having a black skin” or being “snub nosed”. He is of “unintelligible speech”. It is emphasised that the Dasyus, though rich in cattle do not perform the sacrifices so important in Vedic religion. After the conquest, the Dasyus appear to have been transformed into Sudras and incorporated into the lower rungs of the Aryan social scale.’¹ This observation made by Dr. Asko Parpola bears ample testimony to this fact.

The aborigines of India are undoubtedly Dravidians. It is unfortunate that many north Indian races and most of the Brahmins claim Aryan origin. If they abhor the name Dravidian, they may well call them as Indians. The alien Aryans, a pastoral nomadic tribe of the middle Asia, were fewer in number and they subdued the natives of India by their shrewd tactics. In that process, the Dravidians were Aryanised in language while the Aryans were Dravidised in culture.²

Pre-Aryan Culture

The Pre-Aryan civilization is preserved to a meagre percentage in the villages of the peninsular India and especially in the extreme South.

Vincent Smith, in his *Early History of India* quotes that India proper is in the South :

‘ The attempt to find the basic element of Hindu civilization by a study of Sanskrit and the History of Sanskrit in Upper India is to begin the problem at its worst end and most complicated point. India, the South of Vindhyas—the peninsular India still continues to be India proper. Here the bulk of people continue distinctly to retain their Pre-Aryan Social institutions. Even here the process of Aryanization has gone—indeed, gone too far to leave it easy for the historian to distinguish the native warp from the foreign woof. But if there is anywhere any chance of such successful disentanglement it is in the South ; and the farther South we go the larger does the chance grow.

The Scientific historian of India, then ought to begin his study with the basin of the Krishna, of the Cauvery, of the Vaigai, rather than with the Gangetic plain as it has been now long, too long, the fashion.’²

But the attitude of historians has not changed. Many writers presume that the Aryans, chiefly a pastoral nomadic tribe of the Central Asia, were the pioneers in the field of navigation and were superior to the aborigines of the peninsular India, *which is historically untrue*.

The indigenous inhabitants’ reputation as sea-farers could best be understood through a study of the decipherment of the Indus seals and the later Greek texts of the first and second century B.C. The Indian Ocean was the first centre of the oceanic activity of man.

The Tamils of the Pre-Christian era are said to be the then existing specimen, if not the exact replica of the Pre-Aryan Indians. The remaining early Tamil literary pieces around the dawn of the Christian era reveal the panorama of the ancient Indians’ maritime activities.

The Tamil Society

The Tamil land was classified into 4 main divisions, viz. the Hilly region (*Kurīñci*), Pastoral region (*Mullai*), Agricultural region (*Marutam*), and the Littoral region (*Neytal*). The desertedness of the hilly and pastoral regions was called *Pālai*. Each region has its distinct inhabitants, occupation, foodstuff, subsistence, cult, water sources, percussion instruments, melody type, fauna and flora, etc.

The littoral region was inhabited by Paravar or *Paratavar* (Boat-men), *Timilar* (Catamaran-men), *Nūlaiyar* (divers) or *Karaiyār* (coast-men), *Valaiyar* (net men), etc. Fishery and salt production were their main occupation. They oared through the inland water and sold the salt for paddy.⁴ Full moon and new moon days may be considered as

holidays for them since they have celebrated festivals on those days and the term 'Uvā' may denote holiday as a metonym.

All the three Tamil Kings had two capitals, one in the agricultural region and the other in the littoral region. The areas surrounding the littoral capital were virtually ruled by the Prince designate. *Maturai*, *Uṛaiyūr* and *Karuvūr* were the agricultural or royal capital cities of *Pandyas*, *Cholas* and *Cheras*; while *Korkai*, *Pukār* and *Vañci* were their portal towns or princely cities respectively. Besides, there were several important ports such as *Muciṭi*, and *Tonṭi*. The Kings were addressed as the owners of the country rich in the wealth, came through the seas.⁵

In most of the literary pieces of the Pre-Christian era, there are innumerable similes pertaining to the sea. Hence, their acquaintance with the great water is evident.

The ancient Tamils sailed out (1) in pursuit of commerce (2) for sight seeing and to have cultural contacts and (3) to bring the overseas countries under their sway. The fair sex was forbidden to accompany their counterparts at sea-faring. A long cherished habit has been mentioned in rule 980 of *Tolkāppiam*, which dates back to 7th century B.C.⁶

COMMERCE

A Port Scene

The portal cities were called *Paṭṭiṇam*, a low lying land. *Cennaip-paṭṭiṇam*, *Nākappaṭṭiṇam*, *Kāviripūmpaṭṭiṇam*, etc., have *paṭṭiṇam* as their suffix.

The sea-ports had very tall light-houses to guide the ships in the night. The light-houses had distinct signals to distinguish the ports.⁷

Big ships were anchored at a distance from the port and the goods were taken to the shore in boats.⁸ In broad and deep rivers such as *Kāviri* very big ships could enter the provided port, without shrinking their sails.⁹ The ships had their flags atop. Ships were always crowded in ports such as *Pukār*.¹⁰ The arrival and departure of a ship was accompanied by the beating of drums. Very great ships from Tamilnad left the ports to far off countries piercing through the great ocean.¹¹

Extensive loading and unloading of ships were held. The goods were passed on after putting the royal seal upon them, in token of collecting the customs duty. The ware-housing seemed to be a hill of goods. The Arabian horses from the Middle East, the niger nigrum of the Eastern coast, the diamond and gold of the Northern mountains,

the sandalwood and aquila of the Western ghats, the pearl of the Southern seas, the coral of the Eastern water, the products of Ganges and *Kāviri*, the catables from Ceylon and Burma, the rare varieties (from China) and very valuables were poured into the market of the portal cities from all the directions.¹²

The niger nigrum of the Western ghats were sent through ships to the Eastern coast. Great ships went into the Ganges for their trade in the upper India. The ancient Tamils' preference of water routes in lieu of other shorter surface ones proves their maritime skill.

Those in pursuit of wealth due to sea-faring settled around the ports. People of various countries with different tongues mingled in the settlement.¹³ At first the Greeks were called as *Yavanar* in Tamil, since the name of their nation in Greek is Iaones. However the term Yavanar was later applied to the Romans and then to all the Western merchants.

The Tamils were fond of the Arabian steeds. The Arabs bartered their horses for the artistic Indian jewelleries.¹⁴ The Greek and Roman ships parted their gold for niger nigrum or pepper.¹⁵ The Tamils had their fascination on the Greece-made lamps.¹⁶ The Arabian steeds and camels have a place in *Tolkāppiam*.

The profitable trade of the Rājah of Cochin with China, Persia and Arabia in the 14th century may help us to infer about the trade relations between these countries in the early centuries of Christian era.¹⁷

External evidences of commerce

The teak, abundant in Peninsular India was found at the excavation at Ur, which flourished prior to 3000 B.C. The presence of Indian muslin and indigo in Egyptian graves shows the Indo-Egyptian contact well before 1700 B.C.

Pliny, Ptolemy and the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea speak elaborately of the extensive trade with *Tamilakam*. Various seaports of Tamilnad such as *Toṇṭi*, *Muciri*, *Vaikkarai*, *Kumari*, *Kor̥kai*, etc. besides the sea ports of the upper peninsular India, 'the great resort of shipping' to them, the Tamils 'native vessels of great bulk', the innumerable commodities such as the 'finest muslins', 'Kuṭṭanāṭan pepper', 'best pearl', ivory, etc., the westerners purchased, the rulers of this ancient land are described in detail in the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea. Periplus is a fountain of valuable information and inspiration on this lofty subject.

According to Pliny, there was no year in which India did not drain the empire of Rome of at least 55,000,000 sesterces (Rs. 20,726,559)

sending them in return wares, which was sold for a hundred times their original value.¹⁸

Linguistic Evidence

The unique Indian commodities, that had been regularly exported to the West bear their Tamil name in a corrupted form in the western languages :

1. Tamil *Agil*—L. *agallocha* ; GK. *agallochon* ;
Port. and Sp. *agila* ; E. *agila*, *agal* (-wood),
eagle (-wood)
2. T. *Arici*—GK., L. *oruza* ; It. *riso* ;
F. *riz*, *ris* ; E. *rice*.
3. T. *Īñcivēr*—L. *Zingiber* ; GK. *Zingiberis* ;
F. *gingembre*, OE. *Gingiber* ;
E. *Ginger* (Sans. *Srungavera*).
4. T. *Kottai*, *Kottān*—Ar. *qutun* ; It. *cottone* ;
Sp., F. *Coton*, E. *cotton*.
5. T. *Tippili*—GK. *Peperi* ; L. *piper* ;
ON. *Pipar* ; OHG. *Pfeffar* ;
OE. *piper* ; E. *pepper*, (Sans. *Pippali*).
6. T. *Tōkai* (= Peacock)—Heb. *tuki* ; Ar. *Tavus* ;
P. *tawas* ; GK. *taos* ; L. *pavus*
As. *Pawa* ; E. *Pea* (-cock, hen)
Pavam, *pavana*.
7. T. *Nārantam*—Ar., Pers. *naranj* ;
Fr., It. *arancio* ; E. *Orange*.
8. T. *Pannal* (= cotton)—L. *Punnus* ; It. *Panno*.¹⁹

Cultural Contacts

There is a reference in *Maṇimēkalai* to those who were fond of seeing various countries accompanied the merchants on sea.²⁰

An ancestor of *Atikamān* brought forth the sugarcane from China to be cultivated in India.²¹

A Pandyan King sent two embassies to Augustus Caesar, desiring to become his friend and ally. One of these reached Augustus, when he

was at Terracona in B.C. 26 and the other after six years (B.C. 20) at Samos.²²

Roman and Greek soldiers were employed in the court of the Tamil Kings and they were enrolled into their army.²³ Colonies of Yavanas were in Tamilnadu.²⁴

The Roman coins found in the excavations at Arikamedu etc. in the Tamil land show not only the extensive commercial contacts, but also the social and cultural links between these two countries.

The cultural belt of Indo-China, Malaysia and other East Asian nations is due to the impact of the Tamils. Malaya is the Tamil *Malayam*, a country of beautiful mountains.

The Russians' claim on the supremacy of Tamilian circumnavigation on the discovery of a bell with Tamil inscriptions in the wreckage of a ship in the 15th century in New Zealand does not show any antiquity. Their decline was almost complete in the 15th century, while the *Caṅkam* Age (prior to 300 A.D.) was their golden age.

Invasion

The belief that no invading army did ever leave the boundaries of the Indian sub-continent to subdue others politically or culturally is totally wrong :

Vaṭimpalampa Niṇṇa Pandiyan had taken Java under his sway.²⁵ The sword of *Cēramāṇ Kaṭalpiṛakkōṭṭia Vel Kēlu Kuṭṭuvan* went far beyond the sea.²⁶

There are references regarding the command of the Cēra King even over the Greeks.²⁷ An epigraph at DER-EL-BAHRI in Egypt in memory of an Egyptian queen reads that they were the *Pandyas*, who had migrated to the Nile basin from their original home, the *Kumarinadu* (Lemuria) of the Southern seas.

Does not the victory of the later *Cōlas* in the sea reveal the supremacy of their ancestors? King *Rājarāja* of the 10th century had routed out others' naval forces at *Kāntalūr*. He had captured innumerable small islands besides Ceylon. His son *Rājendra Cōla*, pushing his great navy comprising of many ships subdued *Tuṅkāvaram*, the King of Burma. The *Nicobar* islands too came under his subjection.²⁸

The tradition was kept till 1516, when the Portuguese took 800 Malabar in a native ship to fight against the Sultan of Aden.²⁹

The First Emporium of Shipping

Teak, abundant in the ghats of Peninsular India enabled ship-building an indigenous engineering art of this land. The technicians who constructed the ships were called *Kalam Cei Kammiyar* and *Kalam punar Kammiyar*. The various types of vessels used by the Tamils to cross the water are : *Punai, Paricil, Kaṭṭumaram, Ōṭam, Ampī, Tīmil, Pakṛi, Tōṇi, Paṭaku, Nirmāṭam, Nāvāy, Vaṅkam* and *Kappal*. The last three were big ships to sail on the great seas.

The Chinese of the Pre-Christian Era brought all their ships intended for the high seas from India.

The littoral people who owned the vessels (*Kalam*) were called 'Kalavar'. The captain was called as 'Nikāṇ' or 'Mikāṇ'. 'Kaṭalōṭi' is the name for the sea-farers.

Since the Tamilian sailors were circumnavigators, they were aware of the Aurora Borealis and they named it 'Vaṭavai', i.e., the light or fire of the North.

The Tamil land was the first emporium of shipping and hence many words regarding the sea and ships in both the West and East Aryan owe their origin to Tamil :

Tamil *Kappal*—L. scapha ; GK. skaphos ; G. schiff ;

D. schipp ; Ice. and Goth. skip ;

Danish. skich ; F. esquif ;

Sp., Port. Esquife ; It. schifo ;

E. skiff, ship.

T. *Kalam*—L. and It. galea-, GK. Galaia ;

OF. galie ; E. galley.

T. *Kavati*—E. Cowry.

T. *Koṭukku*—Ice, Krokr ; Sw. Krok ; Dan. Krog ;

D. cruk ; W. crwg ; Gael. Crocan ;

OF. ctok ; E. crook.

T. *Cēlai*—OS., OE. Segel ; OHG. Segal ;

ON. Segl ; E. Sail.

T. *Naṅkūram*—P. langar ; E. anchor ;

GK. angkyra ; F. ancre ; Pr., Sp.,

Port. and It. ancora ; Ice. akkeri ;

G., D. and Dan. ankor ; As. ancor ;

E. anchor.

- T. *Nāvāy*—L. *navis* ; Gk. *naus* ; OF. *navy* ;
 Sans. *nau* ; OF- *navie* ; E. *navy*,
 navigate etc.
- T. *Paṭaku*—E. *bark*, *barge* ; L. *bargia*, *barga*,
barca ; OF. *barge* ; Sp., Port and It.
barca, F. and E. *barque* ; Gael. *barc* ;
 Armor. *bark* ; D. *bark* ; G. *barke*
 Gk. *baris*.
- T. *Vāraṇam* (= sea)—L. *marinus* ; E. *marine*, *marina* etc.
 F. *marin*.
 Sans. *Varuna* ; Gk. *ouranos*.
- T. *Vāri* (= sea)—L. *mare* ; AS. *mere* ;
 W. *mor* ; Sans. *Vari*.³⁰

The hereditary factor too proves that the Aryans were not superior to the natives in sea-faring. Even now those who claim Aryan descendency either abhor or object to crossing the seas.

Thus the maritime record of ancient Tamils excels all other ones. Though the Aryan conquest had done the greatest damage to do away with all evidences, still fruitful research on the remains could be continued. Prof. P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar's observations on the maritime activities of the ancient Tamils will throw some new light on this point :

* The Vedic Mantras refer to men who went to far off lands for "interchange of merchandise". Traders "desiring wealth sent ships to sea" ; Parties of merchants went on the ocean in ships with "hundred oars" to distant lands for sale and barter. This of course does not refer to Tamil trade but if the Northern Arya people traded to distant countries the South Indian sailors must have been their teachers of the art of sailing ; for the latter developed from early times extensive sea-trade and the former were not sailors in early days.³¹

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ ASKO PARPOLA's First Announcement, p. 4.
- ² SLATER, GILBERT: *Dravidian Elements in Indian Culture*, (Tamil Version), Kazhagam, Madras, 1963; p. 53.
- ³ SMITH, VINCENT, A.: *The Early History of India*, Oxford, 1967; p. 8.
- ⁴ Paṭṭinappālai, 29-30; Kuṇṭokai 269; Akanāpūru, 140.
- ⁵ Puṇanāpūru, 30 : 14.
- ⁶ ILAKKUVANAR, S.: *Tholkappiyam with Critical Studies*, Kural Neri Publishing House, Madurai, 1963, p. 9.
- ⁷ Perumpānāruppatai, 346-351.
- ⁸ Puṇanāpūru, 343 : 5-6.
- ⁹ Ibid., 30 : 10-12.
- ¹⁰ Paṭṭinappālai, 172-175.
- ¹¹ Akanāpūru, 255 : 1-2.
- ¹² Paṭṭinappālai, 185-193.
- ¹³ Ibid., 216-18.
- ¹⁴ Maturaikkāñci, 321-23.
- ¹⁵ Akanāpūru, 148.
- ¹⁶ Perumpānāruppatai, 316-17; Neṭunalvātai, 101.
- ¹⁷ Astlay's Collection of Voyages.
- ¹⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, vi, 26.
- ¹⁹ DEVANEYAN, G.: *The Primary Classical Language of the world*, Nesamani Publishing House, Katpadi, 1966; pp. 224-247.
- ²⁰ Maṇimekalai, 16 : 4-12.
- ²¹ Puṇanāpūru, 99 : 2 ; 392 : 19-21.
- ²² KANAKASABHAI, V.: *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred years Ago*, pp. 37-39.
- ²³ Mullaippāttu, 59-66; Neṭunalvātai, 31-55.
- ²⁴ Paṭṭinappālai, 216-218.
- ²⁵ Maturaikkāñci, 75-88.
- ²⁶ Akanāpūru, 212; Patirruppattu, 46; Cilappatikāram, 28 : 119; 30 : 19.
- ²⁷ Patirruppattu 2; Cilappatikāram, 28 : 141.
- ²⁸ S. I. Inscriptions, Vol. 2; pt. 3, p. 4.
- ²⁹ GASPAR CORREA : *Landas Das India*, Vol. II; p. 488.
- ³⁰ DEVANEYAN, G.: *op. cit.*, pp. 224-265.
- ³¹ SRINIVASA IYENGAR, P. T.: *History of the Tamils*, Coomaraswamy Naidu & Sons, Madras, 1929, pp. 41-42.